

**Note:** The article below was submitted to newspapers for use on their opinion-editorial pages.

## **U.S. needs to promote free and fair elections worldwide**

*John Gale is Nebraska's secretary of state. He is authorized by law to serve as chief election officer and chief protocol officer for Nebraska. He attended the conference sponsored by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe at the request and expense of the U.S. State Department. All opinions expressed are his own, and he does not speak on behalf of the U.S. delegation.*

By John Gale

A cornerstone of President Bush's administration has been its push to extend democracy across the globe. Iraq and Afghanistan immediately come to mind, but U.S. efforts in this area go far beyond those two countries.

Recently, I got a first-hand look at this American commitment during an international elections conference in Vienna, Austria. I was part of the three-person U.S. delegation at the April 21-22 conference sponsored by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the largest regional security organization in the world.

The conference represented a unique opportunity for me as Nebraska secretary of state to combine two elements of my position – chief election officer and chief protocol officer for international matters.

The immense importance of the American commitment in promoting free and fair elections worldwide became a reality for me as a result of my participation at the conference.

The conference was intended to center on emerging election technologies. But that focus shifted due to efforts by Russia, Belarus and their allies to alter the OSCE election observation framework in ways that many participants, including the United States, believed would weaken the effectiveness of international election observers present at elections of member states.

The concern of Russia and its allies arose from the peaceful protests in the countries of Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, following flawed elections. OSCE election observers were present at those elections and quickly pointed out the evidence of irregularities and voter suppression that marred those elections. These findings were contained in preliminary but immediate reports by the observer missions to the world community.

Alexander Veshnyakov, chairman of Russia's Central Election Commission, said at the conference that OSCE's observer missions should be politically neutral and should not deliver what he called "political judgments" immediately after elections are held.

Together with other delegations, most notably Great Britain, the U.S. delegation firmly resisted efforts by Russia and its allies to amend OSCE's election standards adopted in 1990 that call for international election observers between member states and clear and objective methods for measuring whether national elections are free and fair.

I was honored to deliver the opening statement of the U.S. delegation. My comments focused on a key problem that needs to be faced – the lack of will in some countries to live up to OSCE commitments on free and fair elections.

As a result of my participation at the conference, I became even more firmly convinced that fair, transparent and accountable elections in the emerging nations of the former Soviet Union in Eastern Europe and Central Asia are critical to the future of a peaceful Europe, and ultimately to a positive diplomatic and trade relationship with Russia and China.

Because the United States is a member of OSCE, some 100 international election observers were sent to the United States for the November 2004 elections. In their final report, the OSCE observers expressed some concerns about the lack of uniform practices and the failure of some states to invite observers to monitor elections. The report was met with a smattering of objections by various state and federal political leaders in the United States.

Despite the limited criticism, the report found that the November 2004 elections in the United States were “conducted in an environment that reflects a long-standing democratic tradition, including institutions governed by the rule of law, free and generally professional media, and a civil society intensively engaged in the election process.” The report said the elections “mostly met” OSCE's election standards.

The report found that “OSCE observers were granted access to polling station in a number of states, although sometimes only in specific counties. However, in other states, access was not possible or was limited.”

Russian and Belarus officials at the Vienna conference accused the United States of having a double standard, because it seeks to promote international election observers in foreign countries but objects when observers come to America and report on their findings about U.S. elections.

Paul DeGregorio, chairman of the U.S. delegation, said in his closing statement that the United States values OSCE's expertise in election matters “extremely highly.” He said the United States is “taking concrete steps to implement the recommendations” of the final report on the U.S. elections in 2004, including steps to increase access of international observers in all states.

Nebraska by law is open to international election observers. I believe that most Nebraskans would welcome them to their communities to observe our own progressive and fair election system.

In order to maintain America's role as a respected democracy and leader in nation building around the world, it is important that we put our best face forward. We need to send our citizens abroad as election observers, and we need to welcome international election observers from OSCE to the United States.

Taking the time in both directions to learn from one another and to educate each other on the fairness, openness and transparency of our democratic elections can also bring a fresh breeze of common trust and respect between nations.

It puts our local election officials on the front line of building democracies in the world as we set an example for free and fair elections. Our election officials also can go abroad as international election observers in OSCE member states.

In the unsettled climate of today's world, with terrorists and anarchists attempting to prevent democratic rule of law, it is crucial that America remains positive with a powerful message of freedom. America can confidently set a standard that other nations may be more likely choose to follow.

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